

RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Quarterly

VOLUME 46 No. 3

2016

Titans of Rutland Trucking (1930-1993)



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(Top photo) Roy Spear always had a love affair with horsepower from his 1920 horse to his trucks, power boat, and homemade airplane. (Bottom photo) Guy Wilson (left) and his brother "Reggie" (right) were early drivers for Roy Spear. The Wilson brothers also helped Roy's widow with the company and ultimately took over the business.

About the Author

David G. Zsido was born in Proctor. He is a graduate of Mount St. Joseph Academy and Norwich University. He is an avid collector of truck history and memorabilia, including antique trucks and equipment. He has authored: "Antique Trucks: A Different Kind of Horsepower", "The Early Years of Company C 368th Engineer Battalion, U.S. Army Reserve in Rutland, Vermont", "The Secrets of Glen Station", "Cinderella's Sweets", "The 486th Anti-Anything Battalion", "F. A. Tucker Inc., General Contractors" and "One Last Coffee at the Midway Diner".

Introduction

About eight years ago or so, Roger 'Doc' West, a retired truck driver who had driven for Guy E. Wilson, St. Johnsbury, and Roadway companies, phoned and suggested that I give Sandy Craw a call. According to 'Doc', Sandy had a small stack of photographs and other memorabilia from the Roy E. Spear trucking company of East Clarendon. I called Sandy and learned that she was moving and was considering passing on the truck related information. She said she would call me back when she had decided what to do with the material. On 10 September 2008, she called me and advised that she was in the process of moving the material a second time and that perhaps the time had come to find a new home for it.

Sandy and her husband, Dave, stopped by later that evening with their arms filled with material. As we visited in the living room, I learned that Sandy was the daughter of Doris Spear Thompson, Roy's widow. Obviously Sandy never met Roy as he had died a few years before she was born. However, she provided a brief glimpse of what she had learned about the man from her mother and others in the area. The dozen or so photographs captured the essence of the small fleet of trucks which Roy and his widow Doris used in their small business. There were also a couple of copies of the annual ICC certificates along with a business ledger, and a very special newspaper clipping.

The author needs to thank Roger 'Doc' West and Fred Beauchamp, who had both driven trucks for Guy H. Wilson Motor Trucking Company of Rutland for the information they shared with the author. 'Doc' drove for Wilson from 1956 to 1971, before moving on to St. Johnsbury Trucking for ten years, and then on to Roadway Express. Fred drove for Wilson for about ten years, before starting his thirty year career as an over-the-road driver for UPS in 1969. Thanks to both for helping to make this story possible.

Titans of Rutland Trucking (1930-1993)

By David Zsido

Roy Edwin Spear was born in 1904 in West Rutland. As a young lad he was enthusiastic about horseback riding and he owned a horse of his own. He must have possessed a great deal of meaningful ideas and the ambition and fortitude to accomplish his goals. In the summer of 1930 with the Great Depression still in its infancy, Roy decided to approach the Grand Union Tea Company about delivering groceries from its warehouse in Green Island, New York, to various store locations throughout Vermont. He received a rather short letter back from a Mr. Waggener of Grand Union who had to be intrigued with the idea and the young man. However, he thought it best to have Roy come to the warehouse location to discuss it further. Obviously the two men came to an agreement, and R. E. Spear, a small rural trucking company, began hauling Grand Union groceries throughout Vermont. Just imagine the confidence of the twenty-six year old! An early 1930s photograph shows the Spear fleet consisting of at least seven trucks of several different makes lined up at the East Clarendon Garage.



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An early 1930s photograph of the R.E. Spear truck fleet.

Locally, perhaps the one event which created some notoriety for young Roy occurred when he attempted to cross a marble workers' picket line with three of his trucks in 1935. The young truck company owner, then only 31, must have surmised that his trucks might encounter some resistance. Roy was in the lead vehicle. As he stopped at the picket line of the two-day-old strike he hopped from his truck clutching what was referred to as a 'machine gun'. The local newspaper photographer was present at the time, and the next day's issue featured several photos of the encounter. It was reported that a picket grabbed the gun from

Spear, emptied the clip, and then handed the gun back to Roy. The disappointed young trucking entrepreneur had little choice but to turn his trucks around and leave. Apparently the federal attorney happened to see news of the altercation and must have contacted Roy and seized the gun. A few days after the news report Roy had completed a firearms permit application for the 30-caliber, eight shot Luger automatic, which was then in the hands of the federal attorney. Sandy hadn't learned of the 'whereabouts' of the gun. But she thought that it had never been returned and noted that he had numerous other firearms.

Although it can't be fully substantiated, it seemed likely that he may have been a member of the Vermont Truck & Bus Association, since there was a small stack of applications with the memorabilia. Actually, the organization began in 1932, so possibly Roy was a charter member.

Roy also had other ambitions, one of which was aviation. Within the small stack of business-related documents were a few pages of a biplane diagram, which he had drafted. The material list, which he had developed for the project, also included a notation for a 'Henderson' engine. Apparently, the in-line Henderson four cylinder motorcycle engines were used in many 'home-built' airplanes of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The small 83 cubic inch engine boasted of producing 83 horsepower. Sandy noted that Roy actually built and flew the biplane. In fact, she still had his pilot's leather helmet, although she couldn't seem to locate his flight goggles. In addition to flying, Roy also enjoyed driving his large power boat across nearby lakes.

Tragically, the life of this energetic man came to an end in August of 1938, when he was only thirty-four years old. According to his death certificate, Roy was hospitalized in the Rutland Hospital for seven days, where he died of kidney complications. His widow, Doris, continued on with the operation and management of the trucking business with some able assistance from Reginald 'Reggie' Wilson and Guy E. Wilson. She remarried a few years later to Leroy Warren Thompson and to them Sandy was born. Sadly, in 1944, the business was devastated. As Sandy recalls, someone, possibly Robert Roy 'Speed' Johnston, one the drivers, was welding in the garage on a winter's night. Apparently, some fuel or other highly combustible material ignited. 'Speed' and the workers with him managed to escape but the building and all the trucks, except for those on the road that night, were lost. At that time, the highest cab number on a truck was number 45. So during its fourteen year history, the small firm had quite likely acquired that many trucks.

Shortly after the fire Reggie and Guy Wilson purchased the 'rights' and began their own trucking ventures. Records seem to indicate that the land owned by R. E. Spear was sold in 1945.



The R.E. Spear Company had been quite successful before the death of Roy Spear in 1938. This 1937 photograph not only shows a portion of the automotive fleet but also shows the construction of a significant expansion of the company facilities in East Clarendon.



The death of Roy Spear was a huge loss for the widow and the R.S. Spear Trucking Company. The 1944 fire which totally destroyed the Spear terminal and some of its trucks was undoubtedly the final crushing blow. Note the solitary gas pump at the extreme right.

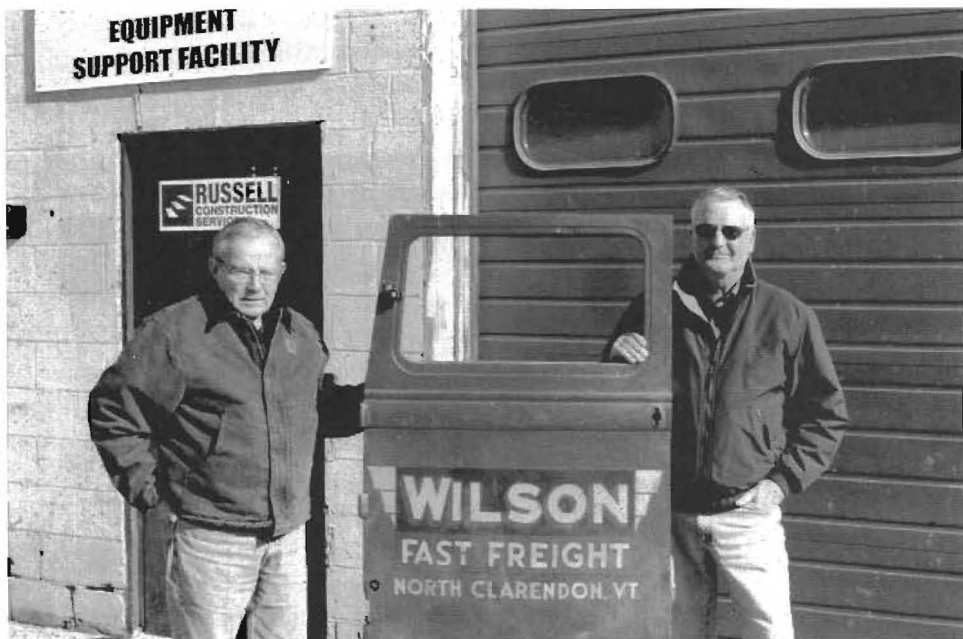
Both Guy and his brother Reginald ("Reggie") had worked for Roy Spear for several years. When Roy died in 1938, Guy and Reggie had managed Spear Transportation for Roy's widow for a period before transforming the company into Wilson Fast Freight.

Guy E. Wilson was born in Phillipsburg, Quebec on 28 December 1907. He started the business as Wilson Fast Freight about 1946 in North Clarendon. His business was somewhat of an off-shoot from Spear Transportation, which began during the 1930's. Apparently, the business was still housed at the Spear Terminal during the early period of his ownership, as one early Brockway door was lettered with the town of "North Clarendon". This particular location was on old Vermont Route 103, and overlooked the Rutland Airport.

The building was no longer standing as the fire burned it to the foundation. The business ultimately moved to Porter Place in Rutland City, where the brothers had a small terminal constructed by Harry Stevens for a modest cost of \$2000.

Wilson Fast Freight, later doing business as Guy E. Wilson Trucking Company, remained at its Porter Place address not far from the Rutland Fair Grounds until 1986. Then it moved to its newly constructed terminal on U.S. Route 7 south of Pittsford, Vermont. In fact, the property, which the Wilson's acquired at 156 Porter Place, also included the former milk depot of the Rutland Railway. Coincidentally, a Rutland Area trucking industry contemporary of the Wilson Brothers was Reginald Goddard, who started his milk transport business, when the local railway (a.k.a. - the 'milk train') was unable to remain competitive with the trucking industry. In addition, Guy and his brother had also acquired transportation rights from Rowley's Express of Londonderry, Vermont, which included the North American Van Lines Franchise. Rowley was the original North American Van Lines operator in the State of Vermont.

As often happens, the two Wilson Brothers had different views as how their trucking enterprise should proceed. Ultimately Reggie moved on with the Wilson Fast Freight business name, and subsequently transformed it into Wilson Moving and Storage, a North American Agent. Guy retained the Porter Place location, and established the Guy E. Wilson Trucking Company. For years Guy possessed the Grand Union grocery delivery contract for the State of Vermont. The Wilson rigs would pick up their loads of groceries at the Grand Union Warehouse in Waterford, New York, just outside of Troy. Then they would motor back to make their deliveries to some thirty Grand Union Markets throughout the State of Vermont.



Fred Beauchamp and 'Doc' West with the original Wilson Fast Freight door with North Clarendon address at 156 Porter Place in Rutland.



During the early 1950s (On the left) Truck # 4, a Brockway Model 154, is hitched to a Rowley trailer. (On the right) The KB-8 International was also a part of the Wilson Fleet on Porter Place in Rutland.

As 'Doc' West and Fred Beauchamp recall, the trip to Waterford was some 87 miles. 'Doc' noted, "there were some fourteen ways to get to Waterford from Rutland, and no matter which one you chose, it was still 87 miles." Some of the Vermont Grand Union locations were still a great distance from Rutland. Once you came back loaded from Waterford you still had a lot of road ahead of you. Newport, Vermont was approximately 150 miles from Rutland. St Albans was some 110 miles from Rutland. They were long trips in a single axel – gasoline powered Brockway.

Guy was a loyal buyer of Brockway Trucks for many years. In total, Guy may have purchased more than 40 Brockways during the years he ran the business. Obviously in the early years, these Brockways were powered by large Continental gasoline engines. Diesel engines were eventually introduced into the fleet during the late 1950's.

'Doc' West remembers the first truck he drove for Wilson. This was during the time, when Wilson only had four trucks in the fleet: Truck #1 and #2 were straight jobs, and Trucks #3 and #4 were Brockway Model 154 tractors. As 'Doc' recalls, Truck #3 had some bad luck with Harry Rogers at the wheel. He apparently ran into the back of a load of logs in Whitehall, NY. That was the end of Harry's career with Wilson, and also the end of Truck #3. "Doc" was assigned to Truck #4.

Guy believed in the seniority systems for his drivers. So those, who had been employed the longest, got the 'best ride', and were also assured of five trips each week. Those, who lacked seniority, were often referred to as 'woodchucks'. They normally ended up with at least four trips each week. Therefore, in 1959, when Guy purchased his first Cummins powered Brockway, Truck #15, Gerald "Dubber" Minard, being a senior driver, was assigned to the vehicle.

As Fred Beauchamp recollects, Truck #16, also a Brockway, was the first Brockway with an air starter. Norm Lord typically drove this truck. Truck #17, a Ford straight job, was known as the 'bread truck', which usually hauled bread and bakery goods from Waterford on the St Albans run. Brockway #18 was the first Wilson to have a ten speed Road Ranger transmission. Paul West was typically behind the wheel. #19 was another Brockway with a C-160 diesel, but this was a straight job. Truck #20 was an International Loadstar series, probably an 1890. Truck #21 was a used Brockway, which had a five speed direct with a two speed rear end. Jerry Tifft was the main driver. Truck #22 was built from a 'glider kit' after Guy purchased a Brockway, which had been wrecked on Sherburne Pass. Bill Ackley became the driver of this particular truck.

Guy also expanded his fleet, when he purchased the equipment assets of the long-time aggregate hauler, R.D. Barker of Rutland Town during the early 1960's. For years Barker had used International R Models with dump trailers. However, he also had an Autocar prime mover, which then became the prime mover for Wilson as well.

Fred remembers the first Brockway he drove for Guy. The gasoline powered Brockway, Truck number 4, which was the very same truck that 'Doc' had originally driven. In fact, Truck #4 stayed in the Wilson garage for probably more than twenty years. If a new driver happened to come along, he might be assigned to old #4. The driver might inquire from Guy as to where the truck was parked. Guy would answer back with a 'tongue in cheek' response: "Oh, it's leaning up in the corner of the garage!" In 1959, prior to his maiden voyage with Truck #4, Fred had been working around the terminal for Guy. Guy received a short-notice request from Holmes Transportation for a truck and driver, and Fred was the only person around. Fred was a little apprehensive with the opportunity, and even more so when he discovered that he would have to back the trailer 'blind-sided' down an alley. However, he backed the trailer in like a 'pro', and Wilson was sufficiently impressed to keep Fred behind the wheel. Fred enhanced his driving skills with Guy E. Wilson in a short period of time. In 1963 he won the driving rodeo, which earned him the title of the "Top Driver" in the entire State of Vermont.

As 'Doc' recalls, many of the early Brockways in the Guy E. Wilson Fleet were probably purchased from Howard's Garage on South Main Street in Rutland across from the Rutland Fair Grounds. Howard's Garage was the local Brockway Dealership. Much of the service work on these early Brockways was completed by Walt Patch, who ran a small ESSO Station on South Main Street in Rutland, at the corner of Strongs Avenue. However, as the fleet increased in size, Guy decided it was time to get his own fulltime mechanic. George Graves was the Company's first fulltime mechanic. George worked for Wilson continuously for over twenty years. He always seemed to have a camera close at hand, and over the years took scores of photographs of the Wilson trucks. George died in 1973.

The photograph, which George took of Truck #14, always seems to draw comments about the positions of its headlights. In fact, even Guy was asked about the headlight locations. 'Doc' remembers Guy responding to one of these inquiries in the following fashion: "Son, these trucks are made in blacksmith shops, and being blacksmiths, they can hook those lights up wherever they want to... ."



Truck #14, a Brockway Model 154, with an unusual headlight location.

Fred also remembered that the driver of Truck #16, was a big man. His name was Norm Lord. Over the years, Norm had pretty well worn out the suspension seat in the truck. So whenever Fred drove #16, he'd have to brace the seat up with a 2X4 piece of wood to support it. He'd religiously remove it after every run. However, one night he forgot, and when Norm climbed into the cab, he knocked his knees into the steering column. He jumped back out of the cab; pulled out the 2X4; and ran up to the office to protest to Guy about the problems "these young - 'short' drivers" were creating.

Fred noted, that whenever Guy met you at the fuel pumps, "you were in trouble!" One day, 'Doc's' older brother Paul West, who was also a Wilson driver, had gotten into a small squabble with a Grand Union Store manager. Guy met Paul at the fuel pumps, and said, "I understand that you called the manager a crooked S.O.B." Paul protested and said, "I only stated that when he dies, I'd like to stand him on head, and screw him into the ground!" Guy turned to walk away, and replied to Paul, "Oh, I guess there's been a misunderstanding!"

Guy remained active with his trucking company until 1979, when he shifted the controls of Guy E. Wilson to his son, Robert 'Tender' Wilson. Guy had always been active with the American Trucking Association, and was also an early and long-time member of the American Truck Historical Society. The company grew somewhat under Bob, and in 1986 he moved the operation from its small cramped location at 156 Porter Place in Rutland to a new facility in Pittsford. By this point, the fleet had been converted largely to Mack RD's, with many of these road tractors being a single drive axle with an air operated tag axle.



DAVID ZSIDO

A 14 June 1993 photo of a group of R Model Macks which were part of the Guy E. Wilson Fleet.

The company further expanded under Bob's leadership with the addition of Vermont Wilson Limited, when he tried to enter into the general long-distance freight business as a separate function from the Grand Union contract. Vermont Wilson Limited relied largely on Freightliners, Whites, and also Scania Trucks, as Bob had also become a Scania dealer. Between Guy E. Wilson and Vermont Wilson Limited, they represented one of the larger Scania fleets in the northeast.

One truly unfortunate note in the history of the Company occurred on the late night of 8 December 1984, when the City of Rutland Fire Chief, Richard M. Barron, was killed in an accident. The Chief was working on the fire alarm system from an aerial bucket truck. The knuckle of the aerial device was extended over the travel portion of the highway

in the darkness. A Wilson truck pulled off from Porter Place onto Park Street with the driver not being able to see the aerial boom. The trailer struck the boom and catapulted the Chief to the highway.

Guy Wilson died on 6 October 1992. Then, approximately six months later, after nearly forty years of working together, the Guy E. Wilson Trucking Company eventually lost the Grand Union contract on 29 March 1993, as competition became greater. This affected some thirty-five drivers, most of whom Robert Wilson hoped to keep employed by Vermont Wilson Limited. After a few months of struggling to remain afloat it became clear that the endeavor would not succeed. Bob Wilson closed the doors of this family run business on 20 August 1993. The fleet, a mixture of Mack RD's; Scania's; White's; and Freightliners was sold off. Most of the ten Scania's were exported to Ecuador. The remaining assets were auctioned on Saturday, 19 February 1994.

Looking back to the 1950s and 1960s, it was a different era in trucking groceries into Vermont. Drivers were paid a flat fee for the trip. Perhaps they were paid extra to hand load groceries into their trailers. They always had to unload their trailers at the various Grand Union locations throughout Vermont by hand as well. Often they may have gotten "bumped" by a more senior driver, who jumped into the more powerful Brockway, only to pull the lighter dry goods load. Nonetheless, they always seemed to get through despite the poor roads and adverse weather conditions. Drivers including Bill Ackley, Fred Beauchamp, Joe Black, Jimmy Comeau, Danny Cox, Jimmy Creed, Floyd Goodrich, Bill Littler, Norm Lord, 'Dubber' Minard, Dick Reed, Bob Rogers, Harry Rogers, Jerry Tifft, 'Doc' West, Paul West and Sammy Young, all called Guy E. Wilson their home during an interesting period of Vermont's transportation history. Thanks again to 'Doc' and Fred for 'bringing home the groceries' and for sharing their memories.

The *Quarterly* is published by the Rutland Historical Society, 96 Center Street, Rutland VT 05701-4023. Co-editors: Jim Davidson and Jacob Sherman. Copies are \$2 each plus \$1 per order. Membership in the Society includes a subscription to the *Quarterly* and the *Newsletter*. Copyright © 2016 The Rutland Historical Society, Inc. ISSN 0748-2493.